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Patrizia Carmassi und Gia Toussaint

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Kathryn M. Rudy

Touching the Book Again

The Passional of Abbess Kunigunde of Bohemia

Late medieval readers sometimes interacted with manuscripts in highly physical ways, by rubbing and touching their books. Physical evidence from the books themselves – with signs of repeated abrasion – indicate that such touching must have taken place ritualistically. Formative examples of such rituals were the priest kissing the sacramentary or missal during Mass, and people touching a gospel book in order to make an oath.[1] In the later middle ages, these rituals were expanded and adapted to include other situations and book types but preserved two ideas: that the book was the locus of authority (definitional within an Abrahamic religion of the book), and that figures represented within books could provide a direct conduit to the people they represented. This article considers the Passional of Abbess Kunigunde of Bohemia (National Library of Prague/Národní knihovna České republiky, Praha, Ms XIV.A.17), a manuscript dating from 1312–1314. Users have intentionally touched and thereby damaged several of the images in the book, but seemingly for different reasons. In this brief article I analyse these marks of wear and speculate on how they were formed and why.

A Brief Introduction to the Passional of Abbess Kunigunde

Kunigunde (Cunegund), who was a princess but also the abbess of the Benedictine Convent of St. George in Prague, commissioned the manuscript. It contains five tracts about the Passion, the first three written by Colda de Colditz (Kolda of Koldice), a Dominican who lived in Prague: *De strenuo milite*, a short parable (fol. 3v) preceded by a dedication to Kunigunde (2r–2v) and followed by an *Expositio parabolae* (4r–9v); *Planctus* and *collaetatio Mariae* (11r–17v); and *De mansionibus caelestibus*[2], which finishes with the Apotheosis of Kunigunde and an epilogue (18r–31v). These three tracts are the only parts of the manuscript that are illuminated. Significantly,

1 See the article by Jörg Richter in this volume.

2 The texts by Colda de Colditz (Kolda of Koldice) have been edited: Frater Colda ordinis Praedicatorum: Tractatus mystici. De strenuo milite – De mansionibus celestibus, ed. and trans. by Dana Martínková, Prague 1997.

they both begin and end with texts in praise of Kunigunde. Two further texts, the sermon of Pope Leo on the Passion of the Lord (32r–34r), and the *Planctus Mariae Magdalenae* (34v–36v), are not illuminated. Colda wrote the texts between 1312 and 1314. This manuscript therefore cannot have been made before 1312, nor after 1321, when Kunigunde died.

This extraordinary manuscript has received considerable attention because it has a unique program of high-quality illumination, can be connected with a specific royal patron, and is intimately bound with the late medieval history of central Europe. These qualities were recognised by the mid-eighteenth century, when Gelasius Dobner mentioned it in his Monumenta Historica Bohemiae.[3] Interest continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with scholars taking up questions of date, authorship, and the identities of the scribe and illuminator.[4] Karel Stejskal and Emma Urbánková published the manuscript in 1975 and conducted a preliminary study of its iconographic program.[5] They also suggested that canon Beneš, a priest in the Convent of St George in Prague, copied and illuminated the manuscript. In the next two decades, scholars edited the texts and debated the identity of the scribes and artists. Moving beyond these questions, Gia Toussaint offered a full treatment of its extensive iconographic program by relating it to analogous contemporary examples, and placed the manuscript in its context as a devotional object.[6] My goal here is not to repeat their scholarship, but, by drawing on their ground-breaking studies, I shall make a few new speculative points about the manuscript's early reception.

Touching Manuscripts

This article is closely associated with my larger forthcoming study about how medieval users handled their manuscripts physically.[7] In that book, I will argue that persons of authority often handle books publicly, because books symbolise power in Christianity and in the secular legal system. In both of those institutions, authority derived from books and words, and the

3 Monumenta Historica Bohemiae, 6 vols., ed. by Gelasius Dobner, Prague 1764–1785, esp. vol. 3 (1774), pp. 72–290.

4 For a thorough overview of the manuscript's historiography, consult Gia Toussaint: Das Passional der Kunigunde von Böhmen. Bildrhetorik und Spiritualität, Paderborn 2003, pp. 23–26.

5 Karel Stejskal, Emma Urbánková: Pasionál Přemyslovny Kunhuty – Passionale Abbatissae Cunegundis, Prague 1975.

6 Toussaint: Passional (see fn. 4).

7 Tentatively titled Touching Skin: Why Medieval Users Rubbed, Touched, and Kissed Their Manuscripts, this book is under publication contract with the Getty and will appear in 2018.

use of manuscripts was often ritualised and prescribed. Handling the books publicly proclaimed a powerful gestural language: it projected literacy, entitlement, and a direct link with the Word and with represented people, including spiritual beings, saints, and in this case, an abbess. People who had the authority to handle books often manhandled them for various reasons. The clearest example is that of the priest who would kiss the missal in the course of performing the liturgy. Medieval priests across Europe kissed the crucifixion pages of their missals, as evidenced by the cumulative damage inflicted upon those images. Kissing the missal was part of a ritual performance, centred upon a book. In my work, I rely on the forensic evidence in the manuscript itself as an indicator of how that book was used and handled.

Contrariwise, many studies that treat stylistic features of medieval manuscripts ignore the blatant signs of wear in order to consider style, or even decline to reproduce images that have been marred. Cataloguers of manuscripts therefore provide a skewed picture of manuscript reception history when they choose to reproduce the most pristine and to leave worn pages unpublished. We are fortunate, in the case of the Passional of Abbess Kunigunde, because the National Library of Prague has digitised every folio of the manuscript, including the ritualistically handled ones, and has made them available online at high resolution.[8]

In my larger study I shall argue that manhandling certain categories of manuscripts (large missals, books of legal code) formed part of public rituals. Witnesses to those rituals sometimes carried these newly legitimated forms of book handling home, and treated their own manuscripts in similarly physical ways. For example, members of the laity began kissing images of Christ crucified in their books of hours, in imitation of priests who did so during the Mass. Laypeople were copying what Marcel Mauss would call a 'technique of the body', that is, a particular culturally learned corporeal behaviour.[9] Mauss argued that techniques of the body were passed from persons of authority downward, to those who imitated and copied them. Applying this concept to book handling, I argue that those in control of the culture's authoritative legal and religious books model the behaviour of others, who apply techniques of the body in order to attain status. The Passional of Abbess Kunigunde, I argue, served as a ritual object that shaped nuns' memories of their most celebrated abbess, and helped construct moral

8 All of the images of the Passional of Abbess Cunegund are available here: http://v2.manuscriptorium.com/apps/main/en/index.php?request=request_document&docId=set20070521_217_69&mode=&client= [15.02.2018].

9 Marcel Mauss: Techniques of the Body, in: Jonathan Crary, Sanford Kwinter (eds.): Incorporations, New York et al. 1992, pp. 455–477.

attitudes and group identity. It accomplished this not just because of the words and images it contained, but because of the ways in which the nuns rallied around it with codified physical gestures.

How the Nuns Handled the Manuscript

Kunigunde used manuscript patronage in order to demonstrate her status and that of the Benedictine convent she headed. She commissioned this manuscript as part of her project to expand the conventual library. She secured her legendary status through the texts and imagery in this manuscript by presenting herself in a central, unmissable position: she appears on the dedication miniature, which serves as a frontispiece (fol. 1v, ***fig. 1***, see also ***col. pl. 18***, p. 326). There she is enthroned and dwarfs the other figures present: the Dominican Colda, who wrote three of the treatises in the Passional; Beneš, priest of St. George's Basilica and the manuscript's scribe, who appears kneeling, with a tonsure, presenting the book to the enthroned abbess; and the Benedictine nuns of Kunigunde's convent, each of whom carries a book, as if to reiterate that this convent was a bookish place. Indeed, the first three tracts, those written by Colda, have the accumulated fingerprints at the lower corners made by users turning the pages. Only the end of the book, containing Pope Leo's sermon and a lament of Mary Magdalene, looks quite clean and pristine. I classify these fingerprints as 'inadvertent signs of use', as opposed to intentional signs.

Additional fingerprints were inevitably added in the 18th–21st centuries by those who wanted to handle the national treasure. Manuscript tourists, as I call them, look at illuminated pages, not text pages. Alas, their fingery presence in the lower corners is indistinguishable from that of the late medieval handlers. It is highly unlikely, however, that they would have continued to venerate the images as had been done by the manuscript's original audience. Therefore, there is no reason to suspect that the intentional wear was incurred later.

As my study of some 500 examples so far indicates, intentional damage to manuscripts falls into several categories, which are categories of method, of motivation, and of audience: gestures can be made with the hand, with the mouth, or with an instrument. They could be made with a full hand or just a finger, and that finger could be wet or dry. Motivation could be veneration, destruction, making a physical connection, or simply pointing out a figure or detail to onlookers. The audience for ritualised acts of touching can never just be the reader, for that person's acts are indelible and will be visible to any future reader of the book. Thus, the audience could include many people over time (including future readers), or they could include onlookers at this moment of ritualised touching, or both. Furthermore, a

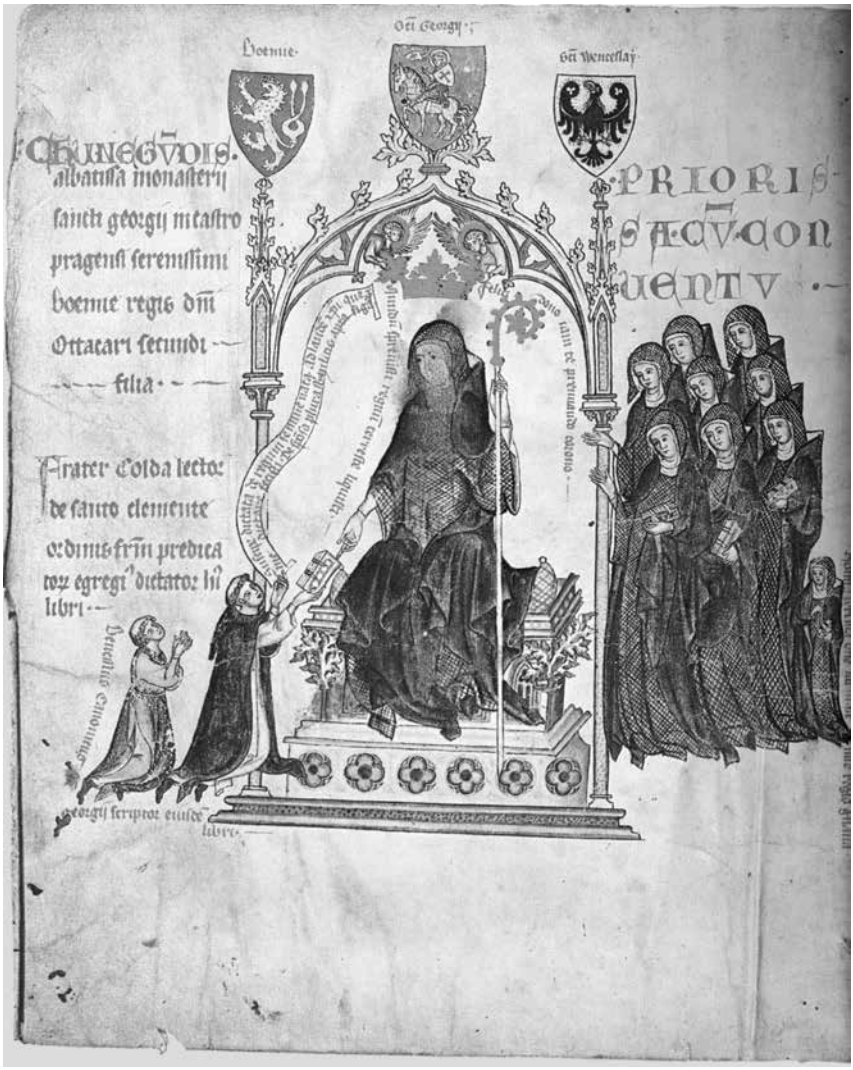

Fig. 1: Abbess Kunigunde of Bohemia and the Benedictine convent, fol. 1v. National Library of Prague, MS XIV. A.17, fol. 1v

book can be touched by one person many times, or by many people once, and those resulting patterns of wear will look completely different. Thus, there is no single context for ritualised touching, but many. The three areas of intentional wear in the Passional of Abbess Kunigunde reveal that they were made with different methods, motivations, and audiences, and therefore, in different ritual contexts. I treat them below in turn.

The first of these intentionally damaged images in the manuscript is the dedication miniature itself (fol. 1v), which depicts Kunigunde. The wear is of a particular variety: it is directed entirely to Kunigunde's face. It was caused when a reader kissed her finger and then touched the represented face with the moistened digit, and repeated this behaviour on many occasions. Just as the depicted abbess appears before her cohort of habited nuns – their heads all inclined downward to express their humility, while at the same time gesturing to her with their hands and looking at her attentively – the nuns themselves would have formed the main audience for this work, which was, after all, made for the conventual library. Marks of wear on her image imply that Kunigunde was venerated like a saint and therefore wet-touched in veneration. Such a gesture makes most sense not as an act of 'private' devotion, but as a performance enacted for the benefit of a few onlookers, in this case, the Benedictine nuns. The eight pictured may represent the actual number in the convent when the book was made. This ritualised activity makes sense in the context of the manuscript, as this frontispiece (fol. 1v) falls opposite Colda's dedication to Kunigunde, which lauds the abbess/princess with superlatives and exalts the bloodline of the Bohemian regents, before describing how the text was written by the most humble brother Colda. One can imagine a lector/nun reading this text aloud to the other sisters, and showing the dedicatory image to the audience, pointing out the images of the persons as they are named in the text. Then she would kiss her finger and transport the gesture of the kiss to the face of Kunigunde.

Close analysis of the degradation of the image reveals this gesture. Specifically, a grid-like pattern of black ink strokes defines the abbess's habit. Just to the left of her face, one can see the offset of this grid, made when a damp finger touched the figure's represented garb and lifted the ink from the page. But that finger touched down a second time, this time depositing that ink in the space between the figure's face and the red text declaiming her identity. The entire area from the top of her head to the bottom of her breast has been wet-touched in this manner, by a single person making a similar gesture over the course of several readings. As this manuscript contains texts relevant to the Passion, it may have been read communally at the end of Lent in the days leading up to Easter. If it were read annually, then the previous years' smudges would serve as a prompt for the reader to wet-touch the face of the abbess again, as was the ritualised norm.

These sisters reverently touched another folio in the book, the famous *arma Christi* image on fol. 10r, but did so with another set of gestures (***fig. 2***). The recto side of the image contains schematic images of the *arma Christi*, each item labelled. Fol. 10 forms a bifolium with fol. 2 (with Kunigunde's dedication miniature). It could be said that fol. 10 serves as a quire filler so that the fresh text (Colda's second tract) can begin on a fresh quire on fol. 11.[10] At any rate, the theme of the image – the *arma Christi* – is relevant to the Passion theme of Colda's tracts, but the image does not 'illustrate' the text it precedes, the *Planctus and collaetatio Mariae* (11r–17v). The pattern of wear is different and reveals another form of handling. Christ's skin, especially that of his face, torso, hands and feet, has been darkened with fingerprints, as has the giant wound, which has been magnified to an enormous scale just above the hand wound. It is as if the book's users had touched the wounds like a group of doubting Thomases. A small hole in the parchment at the centre of Jesus's chest may have formed or become enlarged because of this handling. Users have also touched the vertical and the horizontal beams of the cross, and the script around the wound has been worn away. Other stains and signs of wear are distributed across the sheet. Most tellingly, the entire bottom of the page – the foot of the cross, as it were – has been abraded, so that the red script inscribe below the scourge and the pliers is no longer legible. Whereas the image of Kunigunde had been wet-touched in the same location by (I would suggest) a single reader annually, this page has been touched by many different people, primarily with dry techniques.

Finally, a third page in the manuscript has also incurred deliberate wear, but this time with another emotion, purpose, and audience. For opposite effect, the reader attacked the image of the devil who is expelling Adam and Eve from Paradise (fol. 5r, ***fig. 3***). This image occurs within Colda's exposition of *De strenuo milite*. Each page of this parable and its exposition is divided into two columns, with one column of text, and one column of images, which serve as a gloss. Within this structure, the image of the devil only appears once, and this is the only figure that has been attacked. In the upper register, God casts Adam and Eve out of Paradise, while in the lower register, their fate grows even worse: the devil casts them into hell, which is represented as a burning turreted building. Because their hands are bound, Adam and Eve cannot even cover their shame. Their blindfolds are an added element of torture, but also signify their blindness to virtue. A reader has treated the devil to repeated attack: using a dry finger, she has brushed up and down the devil's furry body, as if to erase it. Whereas the reader used a wet finger to transfer an osculation to the face of Kunigunde on fol. 1v, she

10 For a collation diagram, consult Toussaint: Passional (see fn. 4), Appendix 2, p. 197.

Fig. 2: The arma Christi and the wounds of Christ crucified (fol. 10r)

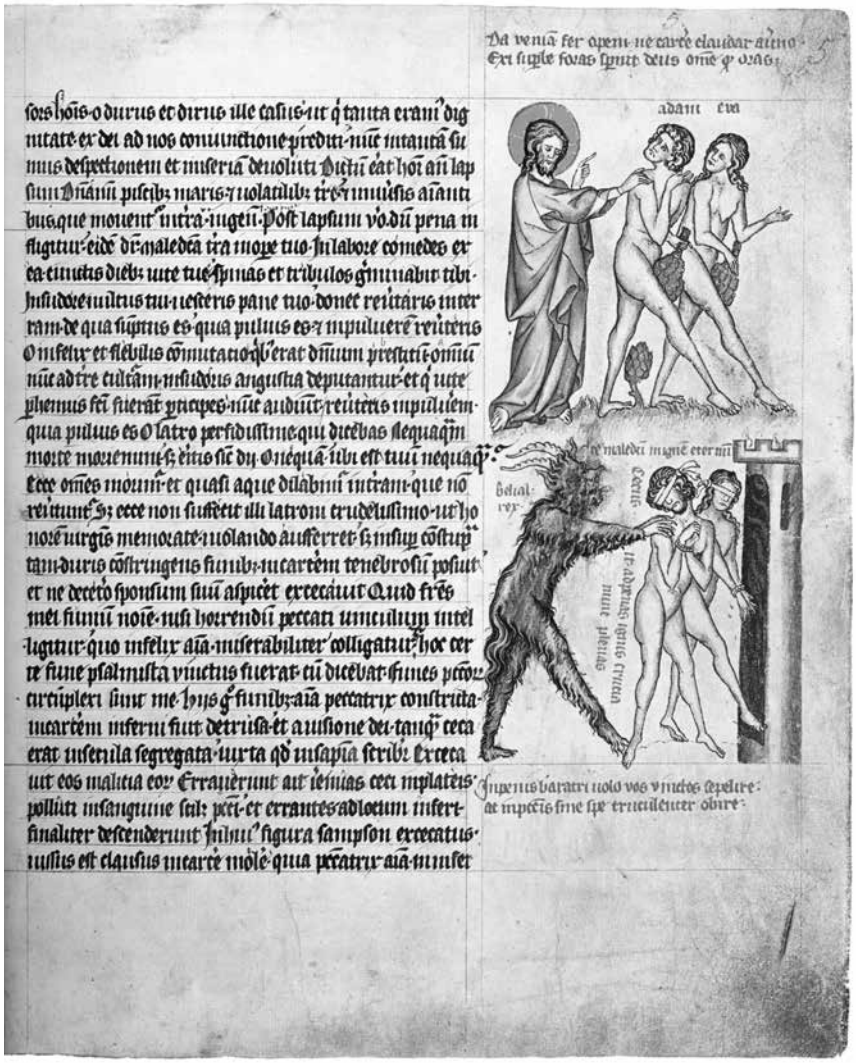

Fig. 3: The devil expelling Adam and Eve from Paradise (fol. 5r)

did not kiss her finger before touching the devil on fol. 5r. Consequently, the blank ink outline has been smudged across the parchment, but has not been dissolved. The gesture she used for wet-touching Kunigunde – a gentle kissing and pressing of the face – also differs from that which she used on the devil. In the latter case, she quickly rubbed up and down, apparently with her right hand, given the angle of the strokes. She has particularly attacked the devil's face, but also tried to negate his entire torso, from his pointy ear to his hairy tail. I would suggest that she did this in the context of reading the book aloud to a small audience of nuns, and that her gesture added drama to the recitation. In this way, the readers registered their moral position with regard to these figures and left their physical gestures as marks on the page, which permanently recorded their attitudes.

Conclusion

Here is one scenario that explains the three areas of damage in this book: in the decades following its construction, this book was read aloud and handled publicly by the Benedictine nuns of St George, perhaps as a collation reading during the season leading up to Good Friday. After Kunigunde died in 1321, the other sisters ritualised her memory by enumerating her deeds at the beginning and end of this manuscript. The nun reading the opening text aloud wet-touched the face of Kunigunde as a public display of piety. When she reached fol. 5r, she dry-erased the devil as a tangible signal of moral outrage. The lector/nun's gesture therefore enhanced the meaning of the book's texts and images.

When the reader reached fol. 10r, she turned the book around and offered it to the other sisters, who each touched it. Some of them touched the face, cross, or wounds of Christ. Others more meekly only touched the part of the page closest to them: the bottom. They did this in a collective, emotionally-laden ceremony, and they would have been under considerable peer pressure to touch the image with a display of piety and emotion. This was a test of group belonging, for which the sisters each performed a 'technique of the body' that was imposed collectively.[11] When they acted in this way, users made an indelible display of their physical piety.

Users handled three of the images in different ways, suggesting that it was involved in several rituals. On two of the pages, the damage was highly localised, but in one case the damage resulted from veneration, and in the other, from iconophobia. In both cases, a single reader, quite possibly reading aloud,

11 In this way, the nuns were preserving collective memory, which, according to Paul Connerton, can only be accomplished through ritual. See Paul Connerton: How Societies Remember, Cambridge 1989.

inflicted the damage. In the third image, the highly diffuse damage suggests that several people – nuns at the convent of St George – had caused it in a series of events in which the group handled or touched the wounds of Christ and the arma Christi ritualistically. It is possible that the nuns read Colda's texts every year before Easter, and their handing of this book became part of their embodied rituals. Through these rituals, they pledged their fealty to their founding abbess, embodied their anger to the devil, reiterated their moral stance toward him with a decisive theatrical gesture, and collectively 'touched' the wounds of Christ and the arma Christi. With the help of this formative book, emotionally and ritualistically they were all on the same page.

Colour plate 18: Abbess Kunigunde of Bohemia and the Benedictine convent, fol. 1v. National Library of Prague, MS XIV. A.17, fol. 1v

Article Kathryn M. Rudy